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ABSTRACT

Appointed chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) by President Kennedy in 1960, Newton Minow disturbed the traditionally comfortable relationship between the commission and the broadcast industry. In his first major speech, he outraged industry officials by attacking television programming as "a vast wasteland" and indicated that he would support legislation for FCC supervision of the networks. When he later spoke of the industry's responsibility to children, a major broadcasting group quickly announced a plan to increase high quality children's programming. The three major networks were unable to reach an agreement, however, over Minow's plan to share the commercial disadvantages of high quality children's programming by rotating a program among the networks. In the fall of 1962, all three networks aired quality children's shows but were unable to attract commercial advertising. By the end of 1963, the absence of John Kennedy and Newton Minow lifted network fears of government regulation and the commitment to high quality but unprofitable children's shows died. (MM)

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Children's Programming: An Industry Peace Offering to the New Frontier

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CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING: AN INDUSTRY PEACE OFFERING TO THE NEW FRONTIER

Television was good to John Kennedy in the 1960 campaign. Many believed that the medium was responsible for his narrow margin of victory over Richard Nixon. There were a number of ways the telegenic new president could have rewarded the broadcast industry for its help. Appointing an idealistic young FCC chairman named Newton Minow was not one of them.

During the decade of the 1950's, a cozy relationship developed between the FCC and the industry. Broadcasters had come to regard the Commission as somewhat of an adjunct to their own trade association--not an unusual situation for a regulated industry. The early 1960's, however, would become a period of regulatory confusion. Newton Minow ushered in a new era of paranoia in the broadcast industry when he delivered his first address as FCC chairman--the famous "vast wasteland" speech.

Minow was characteristic of the New Frontier image. He was the best and the brightest--and he was young. He was named top man at the FCC just days before his thirty-fifth birthday. Minow's legal background was truly impressive. He graduated first in his class from Northwestern Law School and became law clerk to Chief Justice Fred Vinson of the U.S. Supreme

Court and then went into private practice with Adlai Stevenson. The knowledge of broadcast matters and familiarity with the industry that Minow brought to the Commission, however, were quite limited. Minow felt he had unique qualifications, though . . . "I'm here to do what I think needs to be done and I've got two big assets," he told the trade press--"I'm not interested in being reappointed and I don't want a job in the industry."[1] Minow was proud of the fact he was an outsider and the insiders sensed there was trouble ahead.

In the spring of 1961, as Minow prepared his remarks for the 39th annual meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters, rumors were circulating in the broadcast community that Minow was going to take an unusually hard line. But it was even worse than most had imagined. The tension at the luncheon gathering that May 9th started to rise when the bespectacled, slightly pudgy buearucrat told his audience of broadcasters, "If you want to stay on as trustees you must deliver a decent return to the public--not only to your stockholders." These were ominous words.

The most controversial aspect of the chairman's address on the day dubbed "Black Tuesday" by the trade press, was his direct commentary on the content of television programming. The Number One Regulator was actually naming the names of shows he felt were examples of good television--The Twilight Zone, CBS Reports, The Fred Astaire Show . . . It was what Minow didn't like on TV that created the panic . . . He didn't

like the "procession of game shows, violence . . . formula comedies about totally unbelieveable families, blood and thunder . . . sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials . . ."

It was not only the devastating content, but the tone of Minow's message which was so offensive to the industry. The chairman invited those in his audience to watch their own TV stations and networks for one full day. "I can assure you," he warned, "that you will observe a vast wasteland." In the 50 minutes Minow was at the podium, he managed, as one station executive said, "to alienate the whole goddam broadcast industry."[2]

In a nutshell, what Minow was suggesting--or threatening--in the vast wasteland speech was that for local stations, license renewals would no longer be rubber stamped. "There is nothing permanent or sacred about a broadcast license," he said. The message he sent to the networks, which were not under the direct control of the FCC, was that he intended to support legislation which would change that state of affairs and empower the FCC to supervise the networks as well as licensed stations.

The public reaction to the "Vast Wasteland" speech was overwhelming. The non-trade press covered the event with gusto. Minow quickly became a genuine celebrity. His numerous appearances on TV and radio programs kept him in the limelight. Not before or since has an FCC chairman been a household name.

Throughout his 28-month tenure on the Commission, the favorable press Minow received was widespread. The quality of American television became a major public issue.

The commercial television industry in this country reacted to the policies--and the personality--of Newton Minow with a mixture of bitter resistance and protective appeasement. At the same time the industry was denying the legality of Minow's concern with program content, changes were being made in commercial programming which conformed with the chairman's views. Direct links between Minow and program improvements or changes are abundant--especially in the area of children's programming. An examination of the files from Minow's chairmanship provides much primary source evidence.

As Minow took office, a book entitled Television in the Lives of our Children by Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle and Edwin Parker had just been published. Minow incorporated many of the ideas and much information from the book into the Vast Wasteland Speech. The responsibility of the industry to children was one of the major issues he touched upon. ". . . If parents, teachers and ministers conducted their responsibilities by following the ratings," the chairman told his audience, "children would have a steady diet of ice cream, school holidays and no Sunday school. What about your responsibilities? Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of your children? Is there no room for programs deepening their understanding of children

in other lands? Is there no room for a children's news show explaining something about the world to them at their level of understanding? Is there no room for reading the great literature of the past, teaching them the great traditions of freedom? . . . Search your consciences and see if you cannot offer more to your young beneficiaries whose future you guide so many hours each and every day." As you see, Minow's references to the kinds of programming he would have liked to see for children were very specific.

In an industry operating under a governmental mandate to serve the public interest, the issue of children's programming hit an extremely sensitive nerve. Within 72 hours of Minow's NAB speech, one of the major station chains--the Taft broadcasting group--announced an increase in kids' programming . . . "In response to Chairman Minow's challenge to our creativity," a press release said, "we will increase the tempo of our original programming on all stations. As a first step we will increase the significance of TV programs for children in the areas of news and special events."[2]

The networks, too, responded with plans for a "rash of ambitious children's programs," even though the network schedules for the 1961-62 season had already been set at the time of the Vast Wasteland Speech. One NBC producer confessed, "All these shows have existed around here in one form or another for a long time. But we couldn't get the go-ahead (from the network bosses) on any of them until Minow."[3]

Gerald Lesser, of Children's Television Workshop, recalled his introduction to work in children's television as a consultant to NBC shortly after Minow "uttered his now legendary accusation." Lesser says, "Each network responded quickly by developing plans for a high-quality children's series that would proclaim the network's commitment to public service.[4]

ABC, the network most heavily weighted with violence in prime time, introduced the most ambitious plan for a children's series. In early August of 1961, Minow received a letter from Jules Power, the executive producer of the project. The new show, entitled Discovery, would air Monday through Friday from 5:00 to 5:30 p.m. "It's the most extensive effort any of the networks have announced to date," Power informed the chairman, "and while many of the program executives insist that they've been 'thinking of doing it for a long time,' your name nevertheless comes up so frequently at each meeting that you're beginning to sound like the co-producer."[5]

By the time Minow read the letter, less than two weeks later, Discovery had already been tossed out of the 1961-62 lineup because of insufficient affiliate clearance of the series.

ABC offered the program to stations in 152 markets. But only 76 stations--50 percent--cleared the prestige kid's show. Under these conditions, Discovery was a most inefficient advertising vehicle and attracting sponsors was difficult.

ABC estimated it would suffer a half-million dollar loss on Discovery in a six-month period.

As the first summer of his tenure on the FCC came to a close, Minow received a personal letter from a family friend. She praised his fight to improve the quality of television programming, but sincerely expressed doubt any significant changes could be made because of the low level to which public taste had slipped. Minow wrote back, "I agree--the real hope is with the children and that's what I've decided to concentrate on."[6]

The second major speech of Minow's chairmanship came on September 22, 1961. The subject was children's programming and it was delivered to the Radio and Television Executives Society at a meeting in New York City. The chairman characterized the nature of most children's programs then on the air as "time-waster shows, dull, gray, insipid, like dishwater, just as tasteless, just as nourishing."

Minow outlined the case history of Discovery's demise and his disappointment was clear:

> It is not my purpose to argue that this particular program should be on the air . . . but assuming with me for a minute that DISCOVERY did have all the values suggested, then where does the responsibility rest for killing a children's program with so much hope and promise?

Minow then offered a suggestion for improvement; it was a blueprint of sorts, a share-the-risk scheme. He urged the three networks to rotate a regularly scheduled afternoon show for children, with each web airing the program twice a week.

Television magazine referred to it as Minow's "plan to save U.S. children from TV."

Dividing the competitive disadvantages three ways seemed logical and fair. Reaction to Minow's address to the Radio and Television Executives was amazingly quick; within four hours of the luncheon speech the three networks agreed to sit down and discuss the rotating series for the 1962-63 season.

The top brass of all three networks met to discuss the rotating series plan on October 2, 1961. No agreement could be reached and ABC was the first network to break away from the idea. "ABC-TV is convinced," said President Oliver Treyz in a press release:

> that the networks must assume direct responsibility in this vital programming area and retain direct supervision and control of production. The cost for each network will be greater, but the result is certain to be better and more diversified programs, with consequent greater stimulation of American youth.

In other words, all that work on Discovery shouldn't go down the drain.

The burden of making genuine progress in the field of children's television rested with the networks. The FCC plans to regulate the networks was greatly feared. Economist William Melody pointed out such regulations would "surely interfere with the financial boom the industry was then enjoying." So, he says, during this period of mounting tension, network children's series "served as a peace offering."[7]

In the fall of 1962 a new "quality" kid show would debut on each network. NBC scheduled Exploring, a weekly hour-long

telecast and CBS presented Reading Room for 30 minutes each week. As a daily afternoon half-hour, Variety reported that Discovery was the brightest oasis in the wasteland. "Whether ABC over-estimated the commitments of the other webs or whether it was sincerely motivated by effort to make a cultural contribution, the web took a $40,000 per week gamble on Discovery.[8]

As Discovery was being prepared to debut, Power wrote to Minow and thanked him for his help . . . "I have grave doubts that we would have made it without you."[9]

Each of the new children's shows experienced problems in attracting commercial advertising. Advertisers and ad agencies were not supportive of the networks' efforts to improve kid-vid. They shied away from programming aimed at satisfying government pressures. The tag "quality" was a liability in selling commercial time. Sponsor magazine reported, "Run-of-the-mill cartoon and comedy shows have a greater chance of survival than the so-called 'quality' ones."[10]

"The only hope for these intellectually based programs for children," one industry observer noted, "would appear to be the concern of some advertisers that they do, after all, have a responsibility beyond the mass movement of their own merchandise."[11] The advertising industry never accepted such responsibility.

An ABC sales executive said of Discovery, "Were it less altruistic in its aims it would be much easier to sell . . ."[12] The show ran up against "a stone wall of advertiser resistance."[13]

As the 1962-63 season came to a close, Television Age reviewed the progress of kid-vid since Minow made his "mailed-fist plea." "Within a season's time," the periodical reported, "the networks responded with program such as Discovery, Reading Room, Update, Exploring and 1,2,3-GO . . . Now, after a year's run, during which time they were almost completely unsponsored, each of the newer 'quality' programs can be considered 'in trouble.' Putting it more plainly, their future as part of any network's schedule is highly in doubt."[14]

The producers of the "quality" kid shows believed, given time, they could become efficient advertising vehicles. "All of us have put in a year of work on the programs now," one producer said, "and we've learned a lot about improving the shows to make them better. It would be a crime to let that knowledge and effort go to waste . . ."[15]

A toy company executive summed up the sentiment in the industry this way--"The networks are devoting time to quality children's programming . . . Wonderful! Except that no one's watching--except possibly Mr. Minow and his family . . . TV costs being what they are these days, these shows are a poor risk, even for the advertiser with a public conscience."[16]

Optimistic observers hoped the 1962-63 season was a modest beginning in a trend toward improved children's programming. It turned out to be the peak in network commitment that soon declined. The threat of government regulation provided temporary incentive to change the normal operating procedures

in regard to children's programs. By the end of 1963 the absence of Newton Minow and John Kennedy changed the regulatory picture. Public pressure receded and so did new ideas for combining education and entertainment for children on commercial television.

Footnotes

[1]"Trouble Ahead," Television Age, May 1, 1961, p. 116.

[2]Newsweek, May 22, 1961, p. 86.

[3]"Minow Magic," Newsweek, Aug. 14, 1961, p. 66.

[4]Gerald Lesser, Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 4.

[5]Letter, J. Power to N. N. Minow, August 2, 1961. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archives, Minow File.

[6]Letter, N. N. Minow to E. Nemkov, Oct. 2, 1961, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archives, Minow File.

[7]William Melody, Children's Television: The Economics of Exploitation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 36.

[8]Herm Schoenfeld, "Epitome of TV Frustration: Kid Programs," Variety, Jan. 9, 1963, p. 113.

[9]Letter, J. Power to N. N. Minow, September 24, 1962, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Archives, Minow File.

[10]"Tougher than it Seems--the TV Kid Show Problem," Sponsor, Aug. 6, 1962, p. 30.

[11]Richard Carlton, Vice-President, Trans-Lux Corporation, "Tougher than it Seems--the TV Kid Show Problem, Sponsor, Aug. 6, 1962, p. 32.

[12]"No Room for Quality?" Television Age, April 15, 1963, p. 64.

[13]Nobody Interested in Discovering 'Discovery' So it Faces Lopoff," Variety, Jan. 23, 1963, p. 52.

[14]"No Room for Quality?" Television Age, April 15, 1963, p. 64.

[15]Ibid.

[16]"Monday Memo," Broadcasting, Dec. 24, 1962, p. 16.